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The Sims: A Retrospective
A Participatory Culture 14 Years On

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In February 2000, games company EA/Maxis released one of the most successful games of the new millennium, a game that broke the previous mould of platformers and first-person shooters (Kline et al. 2003). That game was *The Sims*, a so-called sandbox game that allowed players to create and populate their own simulated world in a process that creator Will Wright describes as akin to 'a train set or a doll's house where each person comes to it with their own interest and picks their own goals' (Wright 1999).

The goal of the game was that there was no goal. The player created their 'Sims' – simulated people whose personality could be set, whose fashion or hairstyle could be chosen – built a house for them, and decided how they were going to live out their lives. Players could decide their Sims education or career, their relationships with other Sims, and even the way they spent their holidays. The player could choose to give their Sims an idyllic and productive family life, or a torturous existence and an ignominious death. Prior to this, gaming had been dominated by male-centric linear games such as the shoot-'em-ups *Doom* and *Quake*, or beat-'em-ups such as *Street Fighter 2* and *Tekken*. There was, at that time, a culture that gaming was not for girls. When Wright pitched his latest game concept to development company Maxis, using the descriptor of 'doll house', he was met with little enthusiasm. The board of directors thought that 'doll houses were for girls, and girls didn't play video games' (Seabrook 2006). Luckily for Wright – and for Maxis in general – publisher Electronic Arts (which had bought Maxis in 1997) saw potential in the idea – something that would appeal to both boys and girls, and men and women alike. They would be proved right – *The Sims* became the bestselling game of the first half of 2000 (Kline et al. 2003: 270), and the franchise continued its popularity with its various expansion packs, spin-offs and sequels. At the time of writing, *Sims 4* is due to be released in September 2014 (IGN.com 2014).

The Sims franchise has maintained its popularity throughout the years, and advances in technology and computer graphics have helped it to develop ever more complex and tantalising ways in which to engage its audience. From the early 2D isometric top-down view of the early game, players of current iterations in the series are treated to full 3D renderings, and more lifelike animations of their Sims and the world they inhabit. Despite this, the original *Sims* game maintains a small but dedicated following, centred mainly in online communities that continue to play the game and to engage in participatory cultures around it. Moreover, there are some fans of the original game that are attempting to preserve it in the face of its growing obsolescence.

The Sims and Participatory Culture

One of the ways in which *The Sims* was able to succeed as a game and as a commercial product was its deliberately customisable aspects. From the outset, players were able to create their own 'custom content' for the game, from the 'skins' or clothes that their Sims wore, to the furniture that filled their houses, even to the careers they could undertake. This 'DIY' culture amongst its players was actively encouraged by Maxis itself, which developed official tools and programs for potential creators to download and use. As Wright himself stated in an interview: 'We're spending most of our efforts now on making cool downloadable tools for the Sims... We

can make new objects that can be easily downloaded into the game' (2000).

This enabled a form of participatory culture to grow up around the game, a culture wherein players were able to modify game assets by manipulating the game code (a practice called 'modding') with the sanction of the rights owners, and to share their new creations via personal websites and online for a – or even on the official Sims page, where an exchange centre was set up. 'Participatory culture', as first posited in Henry's Jenkins' seminal book on fan culture, *Textual Poachers* (1992 [2013]), describes an aspect of fandom we are all familiar with today – the contribution of consumers and audiences to a product or a franchise, through activities ranging from writing fanfiction to drawing fanart, from cosplaying to even penning simple gaming reviews. Participatory culture is inherently social, feeding on the affordances of Web 2.0 and social media, allowing individuals to come together around shifting interests to create digital communities that are 'held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge' (Jenkins 2006a: 137). Thus, this culture of appropriation and remediation has brought people together in creative projects that demand nothing more than cooperation and give no remuneration except for a sense of pride and satisfaction in ones achievements.

The Sims and its modding communities are a living testament to the concept of participatory culture. As Pearce has noted, 'The original *Sims* series has the most vibrant emergent fan culture of a single-player game in history' (2009: 272). Even before the first game was released, Jenkins notes, 'there were already more than fifty fan Web sites dedicated to *The Sims*. Today, there are thousands' (2006b: 166). Eight years on no doubt there are even more, and, as Jenkins quotes Wright saying: 'We were probably responsible for the first million or so units sold but it was the community which really brought it to the next level' (ibid). Whereas the game itself gave consumers a base neighbourhood, wardrobe and furniture sets to play with, the players themselves turned producers (or *produsers*, to cite Axel Bruns' (2006) concept of consumers that are also producers) and created a limitless supply of themed mods to share. Anything from ancient Greece and Rome to the French Revolution, from *The Lord of the Rings* to

The Matrix, from traditional Japanese décor to kinky S&M paraphernalia – there was barely a niche left unrepresented – if you wanted your game to reflect your own interests and predilections, there was bound to be user-generated custom content available for it.

Naturally, many individuals invested much time, effort and passion into these participatory practices, and through collaborative efforts with other gamers, some also became attached to their communities. Small wonder, then, that some of these communities may have survived the later iterations of *The Sims* franchise with their more realistic graphics and goal-orientated gameplay. Many fans of the original game left the community only to return later upon rediscovering *The Sims* at a later date, sometimes due to their displeasure with the series' later titles (Reid 2012).

A Cult Game for Cult Media

What enabled *The Sims* and its sequels to stand out from other games was the way in which it allowed players to create their own worlds and to embellish others. It was not merely a platform to play out the lives of the digital people that you yourself had created. It could also be a place where the worlds of other franchises and media products could be brought to life. Similar to the fan cultures that feature in the early works of Jenkins and others, *The Sims* 'has been used to replicate and 'rearrange' scenes and character settings from famous works of popular culture in much the same way fans have traditionally been performing their fandom through recycling texts and images' (Sihvonen 2011: 172).

From the early days of the game's release, skins depicting characters from cult media such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *The X-Files* and Japanese anime and manga were extremely popular. Players seemed to display a gleeful desire to recreate the worlds of their favourite fandoms within *The Sims*. If one wished to recreate the Starship Enterprise from *Star Trek*, all one had to do was search the internet looking for the relevant website. Alternatively, one could consult a fan-generated information resource or links list to find a website that stocked transporters and replicators. Once downloaded, you could decorate your in-game *Star Trek* world accordingly.

In fact, *The Sims* enabled cult media fans

to continue their world-building and sense-making activities by providing them with a new platform to engage in fannish activities. Here fans could play out the simulated lives of their favourite characters – in this digital sandbox, they could toy with the possibility that Luke Skywalker had turned to the Dark Side, or had even engaged in an incestuous relationship with Princess Leia. Even crossovers were a possibility, allowing one lot to house Marvel Universe characters and another to house DC Universe characters – the two sets of characters could interact and even build relationships and their own life stories.
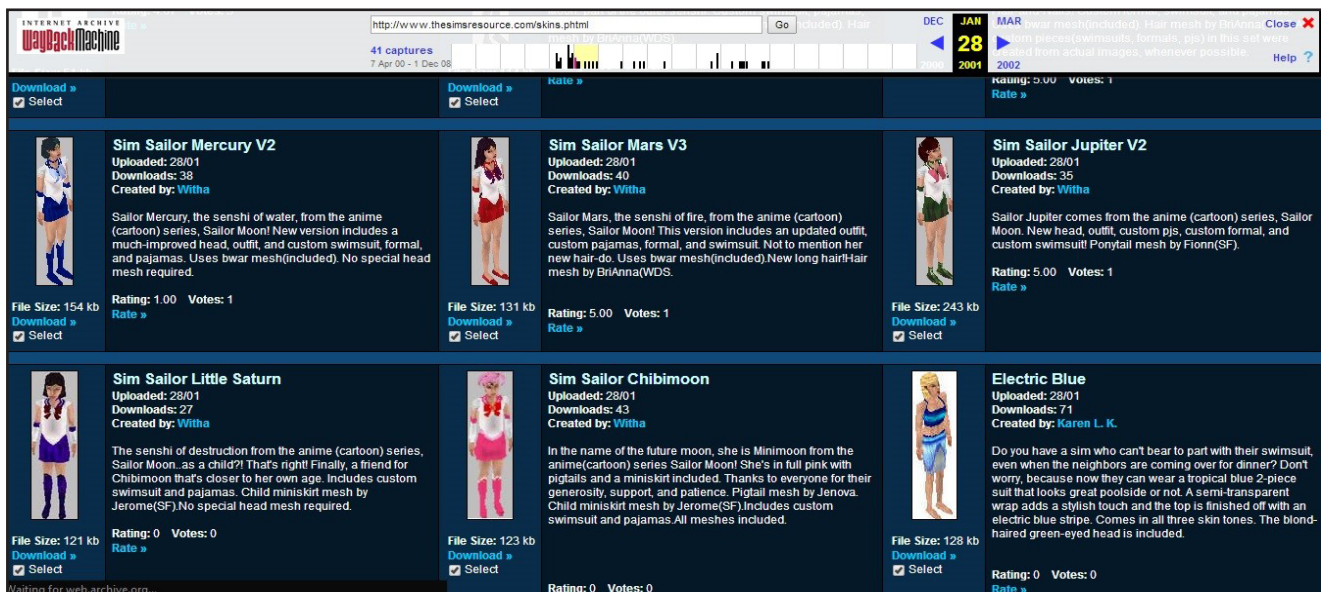
In other words, what *The Sims* offered was a form of transmedia storytelling, a process wherein the primary text encoded in an official commercial product could be dispersed over multiple media, both digital and analogue in form (Jenkins 2007). *The Sims* space provided a playground for cult media fans, a stage for enacting fannish stories which could later be shared (via the game's in-built camera and photo album) with other game players who had similar interests. In fact, *The Sims* helped to pioneer other transmedia, narrative practices such as *gamics* (comics made from game screenshots) and *machinima* (films made from captured game animations) (Sihvonen 2011: 20). These practices instituted new

forms of fannish productivity, which also served to strengthen fan communities. As a corollary, it also aided in bolstering *The Sims* fan community itself, as it provided a versatile new platform that was engaging not only as a game in its own right, but also as a storytelling device.

The Sims: Community and Repository

The original *Sims* game is now hopelessly outdated. Its last expansion pack was released over ten years ago, in 2003. One might well question why anyone would still want to play it at all. But for some fans of the original game, it is still regarded as the purest form of the game, uninhibited by the more goal-orientated gameplay of the later games.

Modding sites still exist for *The Sims* – a comprehensive list can be found at the SWARM[1] fansite – but a few sites have taken on the gargantuan task of preserving *The Sims*, becoming in effect digital libraries or archives. Sites such as CTO Sims[2], and Yahoo Groups such as Saving the Sims[3] are continuing to 'rescue' game assets from dead sites in a collaborative effort between creators and players who 'donate' game mods, which are then uploaded to the site or group and shared with other members. This is a largely informal process that depends to a great

Screenshot of fan-made Sailor Moon skins at *The Sims Resource*, dated 28 January 2001. Archived by the Wayback Machine (The Internet Archive, 2014)

Fan-made X-Men Sims in a custom-made Danger Room. Screenshot from *The Sims* (Price, 2012).

degree on crowdsourcing and member participation; but it is the passionate drive of the fan themselves that ensures that projects such as the CTO Sims file archive survives. These Sims sites have become part playground, part repository for their members; places where they can mingle, relax and collaborate on projects as well as use the public service that the digital archives provide.

Scholars such as Gee & Hayes (2010) and Sihvonen (2011) have highlighted the ways in which more experienced Sims creators pass on their skills to novice modders. This informal mentorship enables all players to have a chance at contributing to the wider Sims community. For example, if a player wishes to learn how to create a gamic, they may contact a person in the community who is adept in this narrative form and willing to tutor them. Alternatively, skilled creators may actively mentor others through positive feedback and interaction with the community. Gee & Hayes give the example of Yamx, a Sims creator who started out as a novice and later rose to a mentor figure within the community:

Yamx reads and encouragingly comments on people's stories (and they avidly seek her feedback)

For players who do not know how to create [gamic] stories and upload them, she provides a link to a tutorial and offers them guidance, encouragement and support. She is a teacher in the sense not of telling people what to do, but in the sense of encouraging and resourcing their own creativity and productivity (2010: 56-57).

Gee & Hayes, Sihvonen and other scholars such as Rebecca Black (2008) have celebrated the ways in which modding for *The Sims* (and other forms of fanwork such as fanfiction) create opportunities for peer-led and teacher-moderated learning, rather than more teacher-directed forms. The former permits students to learn new skills through interaction and negotiation with their classmates, rather than being 'relegated to skill and drill and remedial tasks'; in these spaces of digital mentorship, all group members are potential resources with different skill sets, and there is 'a wide range of expertise and many forms of knowledge that are valued; thus, the roles of 'expert' and 'novice' are highly variable and contingent on activity and context at any given moment' (Black, 2008: 39). This highlights one of the ways in which cohesion is achieved within the Sims-playing

community; and the aforementioned scholars have made much of the idea that these informal learning structures may aid in the development of what have been termed transferable skills – skills that can be taken out of the gaming space (or, indeed, the participatory culture around it) and into the wider world of work.

But this marriage of the social and the functional is effective only for as long as its participants stick around, and sometimes the relations between fans of *The Sims* can be fraught with mistrust and in-fighting as Sihvonen notes: 'Various internet spaces, also in the context of *The Sims*, can be regarded as repositories of collective cultural memory and important leisure places as well as areas in which *power relations are put to the test* [emphasis added]' (2011: 115). And: '*The Sims* players do not constitute an easily definable or concise online community [...]*The Sims* modding scene is divided on the basis of its members' individual preferences and practices of play' (2011: 116-117).

These individual preferences and practices signal ways in which players may align themselves and thus generate divisions in the community. In the past there have been conflicts between creators and non-creators; between creators who wish to charge money for their mods and those who wish to share

them for free; even between players and Maxis/EA itself. Fans of *The Sims* are not homogeneous. Some fans have complained of fellow community members receiving more recognition and power because they can create things that others can't – opportunities for participation do not necessarily imply an attendant equality (Sihvonen 2011: 109). This informal hierarchy, based upon the accumulation of social and cultural capital, belies the concept of a flattened, bottom-up or heterarchal social structure that theories of participatory culture so valorise. At any rate, conflict between fans of *The Sims* and other gaming communities can occasionally be heated and result in the splintering of a community, or indeed, in certain members leaving a community altogether (Pearce, 2009).

This in itself should serve to demonstrate that this small group of Sims players is very precariously placed, a point that is magnified by the fact that *The Sims* itself is teetering on the edge of obsolescence. Thus far, players – through trial and error – have worked out methods of getting the game to play on the Vista, Windows 7 and now Windows 8 operating systems – but how long will they be able to keep the game abreast with modern technology? Will there come a time when it is simply too old to work on the latest computer? When emulation will be the only

An example of an X-Men gamic using in-game screenshots from *The Sims* (Price, 2013).

way to play the game? (And of course, with emulation there comes the thorny question of whether it will allow the use of custom content and mods in gameplay at all). More to the point, what will happen to the original Sims community when the game itself cannot be played? Will it simply disperse and dissipate into thin air?

The Sims: 14 Years into the Future?

For the time-being – whilst fans are still ingenious enough to find ways to play *The Sims* despite the forward march of a technology which threatens to leave it and them behind – the future of *The Sims* is relatively safe. Nevertheless, whatever future the game holds, it has left a palpable legacy. That legacy is felt in the collaborative communities that continue to exist around the game and its descendants. It is inevitable that *The Sims* will not last forever; whilst it may not completely disappear, and whilst it may be relegated to the footnotes in books about gaming at the turn of the 21st century, there will come a time when it will no longer be played, and when the frenetic energies of fan production will no longer coalesce around it. But what it will be remembered for, I think, is for the cult following that it engendered well beyond the usual lifespan of a popular computer game; and also for the culture of digital production it helped to pioneer, one that remains such a staple of fan and game modding communities today.

Notes

[1] SWARM Fansite: http://z12.invisionfree.com/SWARM/index.php?showtopic=4829
[2] CTO Sims is a closed site that requires registration: http://www.ctosims.com.
[3] As a Yahoo Group, a Yahoo account is required to access the downloadable files: https://ca.groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/savingthesims/info.

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